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"MY MOTHERLAND" SERIES XE. NO. 28.

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SWAMI RAMA TIRATH

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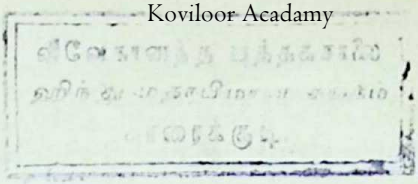

SWAMI RAMA TIRATH

Of the inspired band of prophets who heralded the dawn of the Indian Renaissance, towards the close of the last century, two names stand out in prominence—Swami Vivekananda and Swami Rama Tirath. Both held aloft the same banner of Vedanta and carried the same message. Their mission in life too was alike. Both electrified the nation and drove out the lethargy that benumbed the land for centuries. And as ambassadors in spiritual right across the seas, both restored the fallen prestige and ancient glory of the motherland in foreign lands.

But while the name of the great Vivekanand has by now become a household word, not so many have heard of Swami Rama. But that does not diminish in any way the greatness of the man. It only explains the difference in their personalities. If Vivekanand is the Prophet of Vedanta, Swami Rama is the Poet of Vedanta. The Lion of Vedanta roared and its rumblings were echoed in every heart. But Rama, the little nightingale, melted away in the forest dale, warbling the same divine message in sweet ditties.

Early Life

Rama Tirath was born in 1873 at Muraliwala, a tiny village in the Punjab, of a poor Brahman family. Goswami Hirananda, his father, was the spiritual guru of a few Hindu families settled in the North Western Frontier. Brought up in extreme poverty, the boy had to fight against innumerable odds. But he had an indomitable will and an inordinate thirst for knowledge and passion for study. Even at that early

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age, he was intensely spiritual and a saintly light shone on his face.

After a time he came to Gujaranwala and joined the High School. Thanks to the help of a kind benefactor, Dhanna Mal, the poor boy was able to make both ends meet and pass the Matriculation in 1888. And then he went to Lahore and studied in the Mission College. He worked hard and incessantly, but the privations he underwent were terrible. The pathetic tale of his hand-to-mouth existence in those days will draw tears from every heart. Living in a wretched hovel infested by scorpions and snakes, living on a few pice per day for months together, with the coarsest of tattered clothes, he managed to snatch up his knowledge from borrowed books, and appeared for the Intermediate examination and came out in brilliant colours, as the first in the province. The same poverty dogged him till he got his degree, after which for the M. A. he got some scholarships through the kind intervention of his professors.

His father was unsympathetic and the young student had to support his family too with his scholarships. He was married early in life and this was another handicap. But he never despaired. His strong faith in the divine dispensation of Providence was never shaken and as his mind developed more and more, his spiritual faith grew stronger than ever. And apart from his College studies, he read the great Persian poets and the works of Western philosophers.

Not For Sale

When he passed his M. A. with distinction, the Principal of the College offered to send his name for the Provincial Service. But Rama Tirath, with bent head and moist eye replied that he had not toiled so much for selling his harvest but for distributing it.

However, he accepted the post of a school-master and by rapid rise, he was occupying in 1896 the chair of the Professor of Mathematics at the Lahore Mission College.

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And though he did his duties with promptitude and sincerity, his thoughts were always heaven-ward. For hours he would remain completely unconscious, lost in the thoughts of the God-head. Often he saw visions of Lord Krishna with his magic flute, and his heart melted in tears of joy.

It was at this time that Swami Vivekananda came to Lahore, and "awakened the Punjab of the Lion-Hearted Guru Govind." As in the rest of India, so in the Punjab, he sent an electric thrill through his hearers. His lecture on Vedanta at Lahore, perhaps the most brilliant piece of his oratory, fired the heart of many a youth. As was natural, Rama Tirath was completely captivated.

"This visit of Swami Vivekananda" says Puran Singh, a very close friend and disciple of Rama Tirath," no doubt strengthened the silent ambitions of the Young Swami Rama for leading the life of a monk and to go round the world, preaching Vedanta like Vivekananda.

"And it was after meeting Vivekananda that Rama Tirath made up his mind definitely. He had found an exemplar and an interpreter of the comprehensive kind of Advaita Vedanta that he was already evolving within himself. It was the example of Swami Vivekananda that gave tongue to his dumb self-realization and then he went roaming in the Himalayas and he came down preaching the same practical Vedanta, which Vivekananda preached but with an inspired madness, divine, all his own. Swami Rama gave a fresh and still ampler interpretation of Vedanta on the lines chalked out by Swami Vivekananda. Swami Rama, however, did not command that beautiful language and diction of Swami Vivekananda nor his eloquence, nor his all-disconcerting humour and wit, nor his great animal strength, but he excelled him in inspired cheerfulness, in the beam of the Unknown that played on his forehead, in the sweetness of song, in the shy maidenly grace of Bhakti."

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And finally, taking leave of his friends and family, his students and mathematics, he plunged into the Himalayan fastnesses.

Letters of remonstrance and love from his intimate friends who prayed to him to return, brought forth the same reply.

"You have persuaded me in your letter to come home. Your letter has been thrown into the running waters of the Ganges. Strange if you ask me whether I feel no pain for not keeping up to my duties!

"You say of obeying you? I am obeying you. From the Punjab of my body, I am going fast to the Home of God I am mingling myself with Truth . . . . . Tell my people to think of meeting me at the centre where all meet and not at the circumference, where no one can meet."

On His Mission

After two years of Yogic practice on the Himalayas, he came down to the plains burning with a missionary zeal for distributing his new-found bliss. People from far and near flocked to him and he bubbled forth springs of joy. It was at this time, that the Maharaja of Tehri who was one of his ardent devotees, induced him to sail for Japan, where he said, another Parliament of Religions similar to the one at Chicago in 1893, was organized. Swami Rama fell in with the proposal and in 1902 sailed for Japan.

In Japan the Indian merchants and students welcomed him, but the news of the Parliament of Religions proved false. But Rama thought that it was only a blessing in disguise. He was much impressed by the active life of the Japanese and the spirit of progress that was abroad in the whole nation drew his admiration. He gave several lectures in Japan and its great philosophers were wonder-struck at his brilliance and knowledge. The great professor, Mr. Hirai said: "I see his smiles still floating in the air like plum flowers." Another Japanese who knew no English, but heard his great lecture

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on "The Secret of Success" confessed that to him it "seemed that he was a column of fire and his words the little live sparks that flew about."

But the Swamiji's own view was quite different : "Rama has nothing to teach these people. They are all Vedantins. They are all Ramas ; how cheerful, how happy, how quiet, how laborious ! This is all that Rama calls life."

After two weeks in Japan, he left for San Francisco. Always a lover of Nature, Swami Rama made the deck of the luxurious liner his home and all alone on the deck, passed his nights in company with the stars that shone overhead and the blue expanse that lay before him. And as the liner drew near the port, and everybody was busy below with their luggages, Rama was calmly standing on the deck lost in a reverie with a splendid halo of light hovering over his head, in deep communion with Nature.

An enlightened American, whose curiosity was tickled approached him.

"Where is your luggage, Sir?" he asked.

The Swamiji replied that beyond what he carried about his person, he carried no luggage. The wonder of the American grew.

"Where do you keep your money ?"

"I keep no money."

"Then how do you live ?"

"By loving all. When I am thirsty there is always one with a cup of water for me and when hungry there is always one with a loaf of bread."

"But have you, then any friends in America ?"

"Ah, yes, I know but one American" replied the Swami, and with a charming smile and touching his shoulder added "and that is you."

That proved to be the case. The American became a devoted admirer.

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"He is a torch of knowledge" he wrote, "a torch of knowledge hailing from the Himalayas. The fire can burn him not, the steel can cut him not. Tears of ecstacy roll down his eyes and his very presence gives new life."

The Dual Endeavour

For two years he astonished America with his fiery orations on Vedanta. They were struck by his bold independence of thought and his towering intellect. He asked the Americans to think for themselves and realise God in their life. Boldly he declared that life itself was the greatest of revelations. Theologies and dogmas had very little to do with the inner religion of the living man. Do not rely on authorities, he declared, for in religion as in science, Truth ought to be got at through experiments.

And to the land of Dollars, the message he gave was characteristic. "O, people of America." he cried out, "you cannot serve God and Mammon. That is the Truth. You cannot enjoy this world and also realise truth."

He lectured at many Universities and the newspapers spoke in laudable terms of his inspired talks. The practical Vedanta that he preached, he labelled as the Common Path.

"My religion is not Hinduism, Mohammedanism, Christianity, or Protestantism, but it is antagonistic to none. The overlapping area, covered by the light, the sun, the stars, the rivers, gravity, mind and body, this is the field of my religion. Are there any Presbyterian lilies? Are there any Methodist landscapes?

"So do I make no distinction of class, colour or creed, in greeting as my co-religionists, the rays of the sun, the beams of the stars, the leaves of the trees, the blades of grass, the grains of sand, the hearts of tigers, elephants, lambs, ants, men, women, children. My religion is the religion without a nickname.. It is the religion of Nature. I label none, brand none, possess none, but serve all like light and sun. And so I call it *The Common Path.*"

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Two American Opinions

A San Francisco paper wrote of him :

" Out of the jungles of Upper India has come a man of astonishing wisdom, a prophet, philosopher, scientist and priest, who comes to preach a new doctrine of unselfishness and spiritual power to the idolatrous worshippers of the mighty dollar. He is a Brahmin of Brahmins, a Goswami of the highest caste and he is known among his brethren as Swami Rama.

" This remarkable sage of the Himalayas is a slender intellectual young man with the ascetic mould of a priest and the light complexion of a high caste Brahmin. His forehead is broad and high, his head splendidly developed, his nose thin and delicate as a woman's while his chin reveals great firmness of will. A wide, kindly, almost tender mouth parts freely over dazzlingly white perfect teeth in a smile that seems to light up all surrounding space and wins instantaneous confidence and good will of all those who come within the circle of its radiance."

Another newspaper stated :

" His mission in America is two-fold. Primarily it is to interest Americans in his own countrymen. It is his object to bring Hindu boys to American Colleges where they may imbibe not only American learning but American push and independence and the spirit of American freedom, that they in turn may return to their own land and teach their own people. In this way he hopes to break off the terrible apathy and rigid system of caste that prevails in India. His second object is to spread his philosophy, his glorious gospel of man's oneness with the eternal ".

A Natural Life

Even in America he lived mostly on the bosom of Mother nature. He lived like a true ascetic in the mountain valleys of California and the people around were astonished

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when he threw into the sea, all the laudatory comments of newspapers about his lectures and laughed.

At Shasta springs he lived with Dr. Hiller and worked like a common labourer. He used to roam about the mountains and for hours together he would sing for joy on the banks of the streams. He put a hammock across the rapids of the Shasta river and there he sat, "cooing in tune with his birdies, feeling happier than the President of all the United States."

He was a perennial spring of joy and it bubbled forth in sweet songs and laughing words. People felt their sorrows vanish away with his laughs as he talked to them, or simply recited the sacred mantram "Om." He won the heart of America and in several places "Rama Societies" were started to help him in his two fold mission.

At a lake resort in America, all the patients who came for a sanatorium treatment were cheered by his very presence and went away completely cured of their ailments. "A healer" they called him. He was the conqueror of hearts. Everybody found his personality irresistible. When his secretary took him to the manager of the Great Pacific Railway Road Company to get his tickets on concession rates, the Manager said: "Him? To him I offer the Pullman car free. His smiles are too irresistible."

On his way back to India, he stopped at Cairo and delivered a lecture in Persian in a great mosque.

After The Return

And when he first met the Swami at the Shanti Ashram after his return from America, his biographer, Puran Singh relates that he discerned a change in his outlook.

"I met him after three years. It was winter. He was clad in an orange coloured blanket, and he met me impersonally, bade me sit by him as he started, and there was a flash from his eyes and he said: "Sacrifice will secure the freedom of this country. Rama's head must go, then Puran's, then of a

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hundred others before the country can be free. India, mother India must be free. I was astonished. This was not the talk he gave us at Tokyo, where I first met him."

His heart throbbed with pain at the fallen state of his Motherland. He was pained at the lethargy of the masses and of the selfiish greed of the educated and at the hatreds and animosities between the various sects.

"In India" he spoke, "the gigantic forces of teeming millions do not co-work, do not co-operate. One force nullifies the other, one force counter-balances the other, and consequently the resultant national force is nothing. The superstitious centering of love in outward ritual forms, the blind focussing of feelings in ceremonies and external bodies, and ignorant implicit faith reposed in the reality of appearances, and rigidity of circumstances, has brought race hatred, sectarianism, party spirit, and caste-feelings to such a pass, that the people cannot put their wills together, and cannot produce the marvellous dynamic force, which always accrues to a nation from a practical realization of underlying unity and oneness despite all phenomenal differences. And this lack of applied Vedanta among the masses makes India, a house divided against itself. The relations between the numerous parties are strained."

"That is the bane of India" added the Swamiji, "and Rama makes it no secret that this spirit of division is encouraged by the British Government."

To the sons of the soil he cries out to adapt themselves to the growing needs of the changed situation in the new world.

"My beloved Hindus! By aversion to change or adaptation, laying too much emphasis on the old customs and heredity, pray degrade not yourselves below the level of man."

And he utters a stern warning: "Remember that you live in time as well as in space. You are descended from the ancient Rishis of India, but you live not in their age now.

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Do you? Steam engine, steam-ship, telegraph, etc., are at you; you can no longer shut yourselves off from the present world; your struggle is with the twentieth century scientists, artists and workmen of Europe and America; you cannot escape it and you cannot survive except by making yourselves fit to live in the altered environment of this age."

Right Place for Fossils

And his heart becomes indignant and he chides in despair; "If you are not for reform, if you are not willing and ready to assimilate the New Light which is also the old, old light of your own land, go and live in *Pitirloka*, with your forefathers. Why tarry here? Goodbye!"

He decries against the waste of time in the study of old, old laws and shastras:

"The capability of quoting big long texts to show off our learning, nonsensical hair-splitting to torture the sense of passages in the ancient scriptures, the study of subjects which we never have to use in life, is not education. The taking of knowledge which we cannot practise is spiritual constipation or mental dyspepsia."

And again he warns the Nation to beware of its laws.

"Try to save the grammar," he says, "and the language will be dead. Just so the rigidity of laws, customs and *Karmakand*, saps the vitality of a nation. Upto a time they are helpful like the husk for the protection and preservation of the seed, but if not changed after a while, they become the choking prison impeding all growth.

"Bear in mind, dear people, the laws and smritis are for you. You are not for the laws and smritis. Spread Universally the teachings of eternal shruti, but adapt your smritis to the needs of the day. Let the heritance of smritis belong to you, and not you to the heritance.

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"The rivers have changed their beds in India, the snow lines are shifted, forests are replaced by cultivated fields, the face of the country is altered. Governments have changed, languages have changed, colours of the inhabitants have changed. Yet in this inconstant, transient world, ye seek to perpetuate the rules and customs of the past, which is no more! Sad indeed is the state of one who is all the time looking behind while he wants to walk forwards. Such a one must stumble at every step."

What India Lacks

To the patriot his message is one of complete sacrifice and he grows poetic with emotion.

"Do you wish to be a patriot?" he asks. "Tune yourself in love with your country and the people. Be a spiritual soldier laying down your life in the interests of the land. Abnegating the little ego, and having thus become the whole country, feel anything and the country will feel with you. March, your country will follow."

And with a mad joy he sings: "I am the whole of India. The land of India is my body. The Comorin is my feet, the Himalayas my head. From my hair flows the Ganges, from my head comes the Brahmaputra and the Indus. The Vindyachalas are girt round my loins. I am India, I am Shankara, I am Siva. This is the highest realization of patriotism and this is practical Vedanta."

Swami Rama deplored the lack of the spirit of adventure amongt of the youth of India. "The poor fellows" he said to an American, "live not in the broad universe, they live in a poor, little private world of their own creation." Again and again he stressed the fact that there was an urgent necessity for introducing in India the adventurous spirit of the Japanese. And it was for this that he sought the help of enlightened Americans.

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The degradation of India, Swami Rama averred, was the direct result of our sins. "The Gorgon of Custom and conventionality has petrified and fossilized all the vitality and originality of the race. Orthodoxy has come to mean, exclusivism and dumb conservatism. . . . . And we have already paid very dearly for all these. For centuries and centuries we have been under foreign yoke, have been living in slavery. People from Afghanistan invaded the country and conquered us. People from Greece came and ruled over us. People from Persia lorded over us. People from all quarters of the globe came and bullied us. And this is the toll of the sins of our own making."

He Saw the Dawn

But Swami Rama was hopeful. His optimism was irrepressible. He was sure, like Vivekananda before him, that none can retard the forces of awakened India. And already, he saw the streaks of the coming dawn.

"There a was time" he says, "when the Sun of wisdom and wealth shone at the zenith of glory in India. But than it gradually began to march westwards . . . . . Now that it is day in America, the night of poverty and pain is hovering over India. But no; the sun seems already crossing over the Pacific, and Japan bids fair to be among the foremost powers of the world and if the Laws of Nature are to be trusted, the sun of wealth and wisdom must complete his Revolution and shine once more on India with redoubled splendour. . . . . Those who sleep well wake well. India has slept long enough. Most surely, though slowly, the lethargy is breaking."

It was perhaps but natural that such a patriot should draw the attention of the C. I. D. But he was fearless. When his devotees warned him he said: "Tell them I do not defend myself. Let them do as they like. I cannot be other than

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what I am. I wish, as an Indian, that my country should be free. Free it shall be one day but whether this Rama secures its freedom or a thousand other Ramas no one knows."

He came with great ideas of organization for the spiritual and material uplift of the country. But he could not go and fawn upon the rich men and the Maharajas for their support. It was beyond his powers. He could only give his love and his divine waves of inspiration.

His last days were spent at various Ashrams in the Himalayan heights, on the banks of the Ganges. For he was a lover of rivers and mountains. He roamed about the dizzy heights without fear of man or beast.

He took up the study of Sanskirt and began to read the Vedas and the Upanishads in their original texts. He was intensely lost in this study and lost much of his joyfulness. Here too, many of his admirers flocked to hear him. Many of this devotees from America also came and saw him at these ashrams.

The End

And one day in October 1906 while he went to bathe in *Biling Ganga*, Swami Rama was drowned. The last thing he wrote, only a few minutes before his death, was the following passage in the vernacular :

"Oh, death take away this body if you will. I have many more bodies to live with. I can afford to live happily wearing the silver threads of the moon, and the golden rays of the sun. I shall roam free, singing in the guise of hilly brooks, and streams. I shall be dancing happily in the waves of the sea. I am the graceful gait of the breeze and I am the wind inebriated. These forms of mine are wandering forms of change. I came down from the tops, knocked at doors, awakened the sleeping, consoled one, wiped the tears of another, covered some, took off the veils of others. I touch this, and I touch that, I doff my hat, and off I am. I keep nothing with me. Nobody can find me."

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Thus passed away one of the greatest sons of India. For a brief thirty-three summers that delicate flower blossomed on this world shedding the fragrance of its soul and then faded away. But the message of his life has permeated into the life blood of the nation.

He was fearless and bold. As Lala Amirchand has stated :

" Swami Rama spoke and wrote about India as fearlessly as on any abstruse problems of metaphysics and the great courage and spirit of martyrdom that he always showed in advocating the cause of the fallen Motherland before foreign nations or in explaining to her unworthy and degenerate descendants of the Path of Rise and Progress after centuries of decay and downfall, have been rare even among our best Sanyasins. Had not dear Rama done so, he would never have been to us what he is now. He who was never afraid of tigers and deadly serpants among which he lived, he whom the terrors of the most desolate wilderness and the wildest mountains could not terrify, he who had conquered mighty Death, could such a one be afraid of any human power, however great and mighty ?

"It is to this spirit of perfect indifference to life and death, this absolute indifference to his future that he owed his bold and undaunted advocacy of the Truth, truth relating to this world and the next, truth regarding; Governments as well as priestcraft and civilization. This is what constitutes his glory, and this is what makes him great and this is what raises him above many a preacher, teacher, leader and reformer, who often begin with the smooth, easy motto of ' work along the line of least resistance ' as their fundamental principle."

E. R. G.

[Complete Works of Sri Rama Tirath can be had at the Khadi Vastralaya, Esplanade, Madras.]

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